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Lighting in *Casablanca*

by Jason Smith

(English 1135)

The Assignment: From a select list of films, choose 2-3 scenes from one of the films and explain why lighting is so effective in each scene.

Casablanca is considered by many to be the finest example of the film noir style of the 1940's. The use of low-key lighting, urban settings, and unconventional camera angles helps to define *Casablanca*'s noir style. Later films like *The Grifters* and *The Matrix* would borrow from the style and lighting techniques used in *Casablanca*, but none would define space in quite the same way. It was the lighting in *Casablanca* that captured the essence of the film noir style, and it was the lighting that gave the film its depth and earthy flavor.

Lighting has been an essential part of art since the painters of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The use of *chiaroscuro*, a lighting elusion used by painters to illuminate and give depth to their subjects, is an essential part of the film noir palate. It is *chiaroscuro* that helps to give a three-dimensional characteristic to a two-dimensional film. "Chiaroscuro represents the shadow and light we use in lighting everything from a box of Wheaties to actors in a romantic dinner setting" (Graff, 2005).

Casablanca's style and emotional feel has its roots in the black and white, high-contrast style of the German Expressionist filmmakers. In Expressionism, the filmmaker tends to distort or bend reality for an emotional effect. This unique style might have been lost, had World War II not changed the course of events. "When Germany fell into Nazism, many important film artists were forced to emigrate to the States. They took with them the techniques they developed, most importantly the dramatic lighting and the subjective psychological point of view...expressionists called this story telling style *kammerspielfilm*. These films often dealt with betrayal madness and insanity" ("*Casablanca* [film]"). Through the use of light or absence of light, the filmmaker evokes in the viewer an emotional response to mirror that of the character being portrayed by the actor.

Many lighting techniques were utilized to give *Casablanca* its emotional appeal. As discussed in a lighting tutorial found on 3dRender.com, most cinematic lighting uses a three point lighting system comprised of the Key-light, the Fill-light and the Back-light. The Key-light, in most cases, represents the light source of the scene. It is often the only source of light in a scene, representing light from a window, a lamp, or overhead light. In many cases the Back- light and Fill light are used to provide a counterbalance for the Key light. In the case of *Casablanca*, the Back-light was used in a unique and effective way to establish ambience for the key character, Ilsa.



As shown in this juxtaposition, the director utilizes chiaroscuro similar to this 1633 Rembrandt

“Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine.” This line refers to Ilsa Lund, the woman Rick loved years ago. Their romance ended abruptly in Paris when Ilsa discovered her husband, Victor, was still alive. As Ilsa re-enters Rick’s life the director uses lighting to focus the viewer on the complex nature of their relationship.

In her close-ups during this scene, Ilsa’s face reflects conflicting emotions. Her innocence and confusion regarding her feelings for Rick are expressed in this shot via various lighting techniques. The low key lighting that is prevalent throughout the film gives an unrefined edge to her confusion and accentuates the awkwardness of the situation. The use of chiaroscuro in the scene is reminiscent of Rembrandt’s portraits. The Key-light placement and the faint use of the backlight provide the only illumination for the shot. This is in contrast to the shot immediately preceding the close up of Ilsa. Ilsa’s entrance is set up with the door in the background. As she enters, she is bathed in light and completely clothed in white. This is a visual metaphor for purity, innocence.



A Madonna like image of Ilsa is created in this scene

When Ilsa walks out of the doorway and into the room, the light follows her. Then, comes the confrontation with Rick. The lighting now depicts the contrast of their emotions. Ilsa is shot in the light, and Rick is shot in the dark. This use of backlighting reinforces her purity and honesty. Meanwhile, Rick is shrouded in a darkness of suspicion and anger; filters and gauzing add to the effect and mirror his intoxicated state. As the audience is allowed to explore Rick and Ilsa’s feelings, the contrast of the light starts to dissipate, and the line that divides them (created by the contrast) fades. When Rick begins to accuse her, the Key-light is shifted to cast a shadow on Ilsa’s face. This effect causes the audience to question her, and puts us in Rick’s shoes. The doubt in the situation is abruptly halted as she begins to cry, and a single tear rolls down her cheek. The use of catch lighting accentuates the tear which represents her broken heart and her innocence, and directs the guilt back on to Rick. The Key-light is placed low and shoots up. The lens of the camera is gauzed. The scene ends with Rick, his head down, filled with self-pity in a darkened room.

This scene is lit perfectly. Not only does it convey the unspoken emotions of the characters, but it also forces the audience to feel certain emotions. The lighting is not only successful in creating emotions of grief, shock, and awkwardness, but it also allows the audience to feel the tensions of the two unresolved lovers, and the unspoken connection that they share.



In this scene, lighting is used to represent a prison for Ilsa and Rick.

In a later scene from the window of his office, Rick watches the revolving beam of light from the airport. Rick is reflecting on an intimate moment that he had had with Ilsa while half-heartedly listening to her life story. The slow beam of light illuminates Rick, flashing a puzzled and concerned look for his future well being with Ilsa. Moments before, they embraced in each other's arms, while a much faster, revolving beam of light illuminates, signifying the sexual tension between them. Now the beam circles much slower, and the lighting reveals that a certain element of stress and anxiety has dissipated. But an added lighting effect reveals that their moment of passion was only a quick fix. Prison-like bars are created from a Back-light on the opposite side of the window, creating an eerie prison cell for the lovers. The long, parading bars break the soft focus of the camera and the chocolate box moment, revealing that both Rick and Ilsa are still trapped in their own lives which have evolved into a kind of private prison.



Forced to sacrifice her love for Rick, Ilsa is now portrayed as a martyr.

The final scene in *Casablanca* is by far one of the most discussed scenes of all time. The story brings its characters to the airport; once again, the searchlight becomes the rotating symbol of hope and the barometer of emotion. Rick finds himself gazing at the searchlight repeatedly throughout the film. The searchlight in many ways has become a symbol of Rick's search for purpose, happiness, and, in some ways, release from his self-imposed jail. Again, we see Ilsa bathed in light, no longer the Madonna, now more a martyr for the cause. A heavy fog is cast over the ground, only allowing the viewer to see the faint image of an airplane in the background. Three windows are illuminated brightly on the airplane, symbolizing three lives traveling to an unknown destination, but only two runway lights are visible in the background. Very dimly-filled lights from

above light Ilsa and the rest of the characters, creating blurred distinction of features with the exception of select objects. The rest of the scene is a murky haze. This allows us to enter the mind of Rick. Like a horse with blinders, Rick can only focus on Ilsa and her way out. Everything else is unimportant. One of the many objectives of lighting is to create depth in a two-dimensional screen. The fog and low lighting of the film noir style used in this scene creates difficulties in expressing depth, so the lighting must be well planned. In this shot, the foreground is bolded by the dark suit of the captain. In the center of the frame, Rick and Ilsa are lit with a low Key-light as well as the Fill-light, to create harsh shadows and well defined outlines of their bodies in the fog. The background is a gray haze, illuminated by the bright lights of the runway and the three lights in the windows of the airplane. By creating this setup, the lighting provides depth and contour in a scene consumed by the haze of the fog. As discussed in Wikipedia.com, this effect created by the cinematographer Arthur Edeson, was apparent in other movies he shot such as *The Maltese Falcon* and *They Drive by Night*, and is portrayed as classic film noir style for its night fog atmosphere and contrast lighting (“*Casablanca* [film]”). With this technique, the depth, emotion, and ambiance of the scene were simultaneously created with the element of lighting.

In order for the audience to experience the actions of the actors and the events that occur in the film, it is obvious that light is required. But lighting in a superior film is not so much a necessity as it is an art form, creating one of the most important aspects of film. With lighting, emotions that could otherwise seem bland have the ability to be realistically conveyed. “Light is not so much something that reveals, as it is itself the revelation” (“Lighting Quotations”).

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